

The Heart Beats On

Community shops and cafés - once you start looking they are everywhere!

We recently visited Wiltshire to stay with good friends. They live in a beautiful rural area very similar to ours. When we told them we were involved in a project to create a new shop and café for Cradley, they whisked us off to see two wonderful examples within four miles of each other.

The first was a shop and café in the village of Semley www.semlevillagestores.co.uk, which is home to 600 residents. Three years ago the local people were distraught when their shop closed – but happily for them a benefactor stepped in to buy the shop. The village then established an Industrial and Provident Society (similar to the Community Benefit Society, the legal entity we have established for the Heart of the Village). Many villagers became community shareholders and volunteers.

The shop is in the centre of the village and is just big enough for two café tables inside and more tables on the pavement in the summer. The interior decor is of the highest standard and the whole shop has a warm, modern feeling. A huge variety of low price goods are stocked together with a smaller range of delicatessen delights and organic products. Local producers are used whenever possible and villagers also drop in spare vegetables and eggs to be sold. Part-time PO facilities are available.

The annual profit is ploughed straight back into the project. They had some difficulty finding the right full time manager but now have the perfect person. Plenty of volunteers (who work two at a time) stepped forward to make the project a success.

The pair we spoke to, a husband and wife, love it and enjoy meeting customers and being part of a team.

The second shop and café was in Motcombe www.motcombeshop.co.uk. This village is less affluent but bigger, with a population of 1500. The shop is slightly less grand but is vibrant and busy. It has been running for five years, also in old shop premises. The full time manager is also a sub postmaster so they are able to offer a full time post office. This shop even has its own range of preserves and fudge as well as numerous local foodstuffs and low cost, convenience products.

Both these shops have some disadvantages, however. Being in old shop premises they are both very small. They are also both immediately on road frontages where parking is very difficult. Visiting these two shops made me realise what an amazing opportunity we have here in Cradley. Our Heart of the Village project will be able to offer even more to local people for several reasons. Firstly, as a new building we will have much more room and flexibility, secondly, we will have safe and ample off road parking and thirdly, we will have the benefit of the beautiful surroundings and a play area in the green space that has been given to us, where our shop and café could thrive and become a loved and valuable facility.

Whenever you are out and about, try to visit the community shops and cafés you find. Once you start looking, you will see they are everywhere and what an inspiration they are.

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